

Dead His Wife

Ask Captain Duchesne

It was his theory that fear is a far better basis of human relationship than love; that men should fear man rather than God; that love, by no means casteth out fear, and that fear by no means precludes love.

Anyway, whether they had loved him in fear or feared him in love, women had never remained indifferent to him. Not a one of them, until this cold lovely Adèle Duchesne, with her damnable indifference.

That was the real head and front of her offending, the indifference, her not being sufficiently interested in Mallieu to care, or even to know, whether he loved or hated, whether she was cold or kindly, happy or sad, or mad, or anything else.

But he would disturb her calm. He would pierce that glacial armour. He would humble her pride and he would give her excellent cause for interest herself in Alphonse Mallieu and the menace of his passion, whether of love or hate.

"Georges, my little pink rabbit," said Adèle Duchesne to her stout, perspiring husband, the sultry morning as the happy pair sat at breakfast in their cramped quarters, "tell me, you love me, adore me, worship the very ground I tread on?"

Georges looked up from the *Dépêche Algérienne*, rolled his eyes heavenward, and made the eloquent gesture of one whose heart—or mouth—is too full for words.

"Ah! And how much do you love me?"

Georges swallowed an unchewed mouthful, and swiftly registered ecstasy.

"There is no unit of measurement," said he, allowing again. "There are no terms in which mere human being, though speaking with the tongue of men and angels could . . ."

"*Bien*," interrupted Adèle. "Then you can promise me two things."

"Two hundred," declared Georges, removing the coffee cup from his mouth that he might breathe so.

"Two to begin with," requested Adèle.

"To begin with, my soul. What are they?"

"Two things," interrupted Adèle. "And they are not francs. The first is that you will give up cognac—just for a month—and the second is that you will give up any thought of fighting a duel with Captain Alphonse Mallieu for life."

"For life?"

"Yes or it will be a short one, my porpoise. For a month give up cognac, and for a lifetime give up the idea of fighting this Mallieu. They say that next to Riccoli, he is the best swordsman in the 19th Army Corps. And as the challenge will come from you, he will have the force of weapons."

"But I have not the slightest intention of fighting a duel with the excellent Mallieu. Why should I?"

"Listen, Georges, seriously. I mean what I say. You don't kiss me once again—not once—until you have promised, and promised seriously. That I swear. Now then."

Captain Georges Duchesne knew his Adèle, and his ardent love for her sweetness and her beauty and her wit did not preclude a very deep respect for her wisdom and judgment.

"Name of a name of a piebald porcupine, I will kiss you as soon as I have wiped my lips," he replied, "and I hereby promise neither to fight a brandy bottle nor embrace Mallieu or whatever it is."

Rising and leaning across the table, he took his wife's head between his hands and kissed her upon the lips. "There," he said. "Now what's the joke, loveliness? Why should I challenge Mallieu to fight?"

"You have given me your promise, Georges. So, I will tell you why, otherwise, you would have challenged Mallieu to fight. After I had danced with him last night, he kissed me, made me proposals that only . . ."

Captain Duchesne flushed darkly as he rose to his feet.

"What did you do when he kissed you?"

"I didn't notice that he had done so—in effect."

"And when he proposed that you should . . ."

Captain Duchesne's voice grew quieter and his face darker.

"I didn't notice that he had done so."

"In effect, then?" he asked in a whisper.

"I yawned. I consulted my wrist watch, I rose to my feet, yawned again and strolled back into the ballroom and thence to where you were—drinking cognac."

"Light of my life, never again will I touch one drop of . . ."

"Not for a month, anyhow," agreed Adèle.

"You are much better without it in this climate, my little fat hippopotamus. And a month's absence will . . ."

"It will. It shall. Not for a month will I so much as smell the cork of a cognac bottle. But about Mallieu, you can see for yourself that I must . . ."

"You must not. If he challenges you, that is another matter, Georges. It's pistols then, and you could shoot his buttons off, one by one at twenty paces. But he won't challenge the Grand Prix revolver shot of the Army of Africa, probably the finest shot in the French Army; possibly the best in the world. No, he won't challenge you, and since I have your promise, you will not challenge him."

"And am I to ignore the behavior of this double-distilled triple extract of essence of swine?"

"Yes, for the present, completely."

"How long does that mean, my pet?"

"Until he does it again."

Captain Georges Duchesne sprang to his feet with an expressive oath.

"Does it again!" he roared. "If he does, I'll go straight and kill the . . ."

"You shall, if he does it again. Or rather, he shall kill himself. Upon his own head shall it be."

"You are so much cleverer than I, Adèle. You mean . . .?"

"I mean if he makes love to me again, I shall look him in the eyes, a long cool thoughtful look, and I shall say:

"Look you, Captain Alphonse Mallieu, I have one husband already."

"What's this?" he asked, still stupid from the blow. Duchesne held the cup to his thirsty lips

That would appear to be one too many for the complete success of what you propose. So go forthwith, insult him so that he smacks your face, and then you challenge him to a duel."

"Then, my Georges, one of two things happens. One of two very desirable things. Either he leaves me alone in future and eats his heart out that he has been tricked and trapped and ridiculed; or else he goes through with the matter, challenges you and you shoot him through the heart."

"And I'll shoot the dog between the eyes. I will most assuredly kill him."

"No. Rather will he have killed himself," corrected Adèle, "through making love to me, and thus having to challenge you. Suicide. For to kiss and foully to insult your wife is to commit suicide."

"Yes, he will kill himself," she repeated, her eyes hard and her lips thin.

And that night the brazen-tongued bugles suddenly blew their clamorous call, waking sleeping men to the knowledge that in nine minutes they must get from bed to barrack square, fully dressed and completely equipped for an African campaign with everything they possessed upon their backs.

Georges and Adèle Duchesne, after one long embrace, parted, he nearer to tears than was she, with long kisses and brief words.

Upward at the window of their quarters gazed Captain Alphonse Mallieu for a minute, and as on the window blind he saw their two shadows become one, he spat, and softly he swore. Through twisted lips he swore that at least one man of that battalion should not return to the base, one officer's wife should become a widow, and in black rage of wounded vanity, and insane egoism his hand went up to the breast pocket of his tunic, wherein reposed the tiny phial that never left it.

For Captain Mallieu had seen too many of the mangled bodies of French wounded, who had fallen into the hands of the Arabs and been indescribably tortured to death by their women. Not for him should be such a death. In the phial that he carried as invariably as he carried his water bottle, field glasses and revolver, were tiny tablets, each strong enough to kill the strongest man in a minute or two. If ever he were wounded and left, a couple of those would cheat the Arabs of their sport and rob death of its sting, if not the grave of its victory.

And there are no post mortems on active service, no coroner's inquests on dead bodies, during a campaign. If this irritating Captain Georges Duchesne were found dead in his bivouac when reveille blew one morning, why, that would be just too bad. Heart failure or some such thing.

And if on the day that Duchesne died, there had been no fighting, and funny old *Médecin Majeur* Chanel had nothing better to do than poke his nose into the contents of a dead officer's stomach, and did discover huge quantities of hydrocyanic acid, why, it would obviously be a case of suicide. Yes, it would be quite clear that the unfortunate officer had had enough of the campaign, had got cold feet, and had taken his life—before the Arabs took it.

Captain Alphonse Mallieu smiled pleasantly as he fingered the phial, and glanced again at the united shadows on the blind.

Awaiting his opportunity and declining many in which a certain amount of danger lurked, Captain Mallieu seized upon a safe one. The desert camp was dark and noisy with the shouts of men, the neighing and braying of horses, mules and donkeys.

Duchesne was at dinner in the bivouac mess, his kit and accoutrements in the shelter of his tent, his orderly absent on urgent private affairs of food, or more probably of drink; and the *bidon*, the water bottle in which Captain Duchesne always carried a litre of cognac and water (in a ratio best known to himself) was there to Mallieu's hand. Stooping in the darker shadow of the little tent Mallieu glanced around in the noisy darkness. No one, he thought, had seen him. (He did not know that I, who am telling the story, saw him go into the tent, though, at the time, I thought nothing of it.)

Removing the stopper of the big, felt-covered water bottle, Mallieu tipped into it a good half of the contents of his phial of hydrocyanic tablets, and in a few seconds had turned Duchesne's brandy and water into a poison sufficient to kill a platoon of men.

"Now swill that, you swine," he whispered to himself as he rose to his feet. "And then squat in hell and watch Adèle and me."

His next words were, "Good evening, my friend," as he walked into the mess, nodded to Duchesne, and seated himself opposite him at the trestle table.

Without other reply, Georges Duchesne nodded coldly, rose at once to his feet, and retired to his tent.

He had had a very tiring day.

What about a spot of cognac? Very heartening to a weary man, and Adèle wouldn't mind in the circumstances. She had only wanted him to keep off brandy for a month, just to show that he could do it and because he had perhaps been going it a bit. One did, when in garrison. Nothing else to do in a hole like Oraba. Besides, the month was very nearly up, and what she had really meant was a month in Oraba.

No, she wouldn't want to hold him to it now he was on active service again, and needed it quite as much as he wanted it.

Captain Georges Duchesne removed boots and tunic, lay down on his ground sheet and blanket, yawned, struck a match, reached for his *bidon* and pulled out the stopper.

Ah, now, after nearly a month without a single taste. But no. Ought he to do it? He had given her his word, and they never broke their word to each other when they had given it seriously. They never told each other any lies. They never cheated.

But the month was so nearly up. Conditions had changed, and Adèle would be the first to tell him to have a drink before he lay down to sleep. No. No, he wouldn't. If there were only a day or two more to go, so much the more reason for letting the month run out completely.

No, he'd do by Adèle what Adèle would undoubtedly do by him. Keep his word. He wouldn't touch cognac until the month had expired. Damn it all, he had as much self-control as a Mussulman sharpshooter of the *tirailleurs Algériens* who, throughout the month of Ramzan, would touch neither food nor water between sunrise and sunset, though their tongues were black with thirst.

Captain Duchesne thrust the stopper back into the water bottle, put it down beside him, lay back and fell asleep.

Next day, wearily trudging at the head of his company, he rounded a turn in the mountain goat track and came upon a little group by the edge of the deep *wadi*, men about a recumbent officer lying silent and still with closed eyes.

What was this? Had a sniper got him, as he marched in front of his men?

Hallo! It was Captain Mallieu! Nodding to his *adjudant* marching beside him, Duchesne turned aside, thrust through the little group and asked what had happened.

"Mule kicked him, *mon Capitaine*," replied a sergeant, who was rendering such first aid as he could. "Fell with him and then kicked him on the head as it struggled up. But it is nothing. Absolutely nothing. No fracture whatever. The Captain is only knocked out. He'll be all right in a minute."

And apparently the sergeant was right, for Mallieu's eyelids flickered as the man ceased to speak, his hands moved, and he drew up his feet.

Georges Duchesne took a collapsible aluminum cup from the side pocket of his tunic, and filled it from his *bidon*.

Mallieu opened his eyes, frowned, stared about him, and the sergeant raised him to a sitting position. "What's this?" he asked, still dazed and stupid from the blow.

Duchesne held the cup to Mallieu's lips.

Mallieu drank greedily. And, a few moments later, died. He had, as Adèle Duchesne had prophesied, killed himself.

Captain Georges Duchesne, satisfied that the man whom he had hated was really dead, eyed him thoughtfully for a minute.

"Very interesting," he murmured, as slowly he nodded his sagacious head. And to the infinite surprise of the Medical Corps Sergeant and orderlies, pulled the stopper from his water bottle and let the contents run out upon the ground.

"What they call pouring a libation to the gods," he observed to the mystified sergeant. "Now give me the poor fellow's own water bottle as a souvenir of our friendship, and see that mine is buried with him."

The End

